

Perceptions of the Past

Colonial Constructions: Orientalist Readings

The modern writing of Indian history began with colonial perceptions of the Indian past that were to be seminal to its subsequent interpretations. It took shape with the beginnings of colonial rule in various parts of the subcontinent from the eighteenth century onwards. European scholars searched for histories of India but could find none that conformed to the familiar European view of what a history should be, a view influenced in part by the thinking of the European Enlightenment. The only exception according to them was the twelfth-century history of Kashmir, the *Rajatarangini*, written by Kalhana. They saw India only as a Hindu and Sanskritic civilization, so they set aside the numerous chronicles written largely in Persian by court poets and chroniclers of the Turkish, Afghan and Mughal rulers. These were regarded as alien to Indian civilization, even though their contents concerned Indian society and politics and the people whom they wrote about had settled in India to become part of Indian society. There was as yet little familiarity with other sources in Sanskrit such as local chronicles or, for that matter, the lengthy inscriptions issued by various rulers that were in effect dynastic annals.

Hindu and Sanskritic elements were highlighted as the contribution of India to world history and the presence of other religious and linguistic cultures, such as Buddhism, Jainism or even Islam as it evolved in India, were barely recognized in terms of constructing Indian civilization. Concession to the importance of Buddhism came later. The initial hostility to Islam was doubtless aggravated by European antagonism due to historical reasons, beginning with the Crusades. If the role of Islam was conceded at all, it was said to be negative, and such judgements were based on little or no evidence since the history of Islam in India had not been investigated at this point.

That there could be other ways of perceiving the past or that Indians might have seen their history in a different manner was discounted. Societies were divided into those who have a sense of history and those who lack it. Indian civilization was described as a-historical. Not only were there no histories of India, but the absence of history was also explained by arguing that the concept of time in early India was cyclic. Therefore, all human activities were continually repeated in each cycle. This was inimical to a historical perspective that required each event to be seen as unique, a view endorsed by a linear concept where time moves not in a circle but in a straight line, from a given beginning to a stipulated end. Ways of looking at the Indian past in the form of genealogies, chronicles and annals, which conformed to linear time, were certainly studied for the reconstruction of the chronology of rulers, but their obviously linear dimension was ignored in discussions on the concept of time. That there is evidence of both linear and cyclic time in early India, and that the most insightful way of appreciating this would be to see the intersections of the two, was an idea alien to

these scholars.

Since there was no recognizably connected narrative of the happenings in the Indian subcontinent since earliest times, the modern writing of history began with narratives constructed from this early European inquiry: hence the references to the 'discovery' or the 'rediscovery' of the Indian past. History as a distinctive discipline was coming into its own in Europe and was being moulded by a variety of practitioners. The sense of the past that emerged from ideas fostered by the European Enlightenment gave shape to the writing of history, as did influential historical works such as the narrative of the Roman Empire by Edward Gibbon. Inevitably, the imprint of the European image of India drew on these earlier reconstructions, an imprint that has now faded with the questioning of these readings.

Initially, there were two major strands in the European interpretation of Indian civilization, which came to be known as the Orientalist and the Utilitarian. These developed from the studies made by British officials working for the British East India Company, trading with India, some of whom held office in India and some in England. The administrative functions of the East India Company required that its officers be knowledgeable about Indian practices and norms, particularly when parts of India came under the administration of the Company and eventually became colonies. This led to the officers studying Sanskrit, Persian, Bengali, Tamil and various other Indian languages, as well as writing grammars in English that became essential tools for this study. Administrative requirements also encouraged the translation of what were believed to be legal codes, such as the *Dharma-shastras*, which were actually not codes of law but norms relating to social obligations and ritual requirements.

Much of this activity was fostered by the belief that knowledge about the colony would enable a greater control over it and would provide a firm foundation to the power that the colonial authorities exercised. This was thought to be 'the necessary furniture of empire' and the recasting of this knowledge became as important as its acquisition. In the course of investigating what came to be called Hinduism, together with various aspects of its belief, ritual and custom, many were baffled by a religion that was altogether different from their own. It was not monotheistic, there was no historical founder, or single sacred text, or dogma or ecclesiastical organization – and it was closely tied to caste. There was therefore an overriding need to fit it into the known moulds of familiar religions, so as to make it more accessible. Some scholars have suggested that Hinduism as it is formulated and perceived today, very differently from earlier times, was largely born out of this reformulation. In India, diverse and multiple religions were practised, with royal patronage extending to more than one. This was a contrast to the European experience where a single religion – Christianity – and sometimes only a single division within this religion, either Roman Catholicism or Protestantism, received royal patronage.

Such activities encouraged what have come to be called Orientalist studies, and the major British scholars initially associated with them were William Jones, Henry Colebrooke, Nathaniel Halhead, Charles Wilkins and Horace Hyman Wilson. Some of their initial research and seminal papers were published as monographs, with many more in *Asiatic Researches*, a periodical of the Asiatic Society of Bengal established in 1784. There was much discussion at the meetings of the Asiatic Society in Calcutta, focusing largely on the origins and reconstruction of language and on religion and custom. But, curiously, membership of the Society was not open to Indians for many years, even though those presenting their findings were being trained by Indian scholars.

European missionaries and visitors to India in preceding centuries had noticed the similarities between Sanskrit and some European languages. William Jones now set the connections in a more

systematic framework. He also suggested the monogenesis of these languages, tracing them back to a common ancestor. Grammars and analyses of Sanskrit confirmed connections between Sanskrit, Greek and Latin, and led eventually to the discipline of comparative philology. Some attempts were also made to relate the chronology of the ancient texts, the *Puranas*, with Biblical chronology, but this was not successful. A son of Noah was said to have migrated to India to establish the Indian population but the evidence for this was found wanting! Comparisons between Greco-Roman and Indian deities were among the early attempts at comparative religion, and Indian mythology fired the romantic imagination of Europe.

Interpretations of the Indian past, growing out of these studies, were inevitably influenced by colonial concerns and interests, and also by prevalent European ideas about history, civilization and the Orient. Orientalist scholars studied the languages and the texts with selected Indian scholars, but made little attempt to understand the world-view of those who were teaching them. The readings therefore are something of a disjunctive from the traditional ways of looking at the Indian past. European preconceptions imprinted on the readings gradually came to influence the way in which Indians themselves viewed their own culture. This reordering of Indian culture facilitated the direction given even to the self-perceptions of Indians.

Orientalism fuelled the fantasy and the freedom sought by European Romanticism, particularly in its opposition to the more disciplined Neo-Classicism. The cultures of Asia were seen as bringing a new Romantic paradigm. Another Renaissance was anticipated through an acquaintance with the Orient, and this, it was thought, would be different from the earlier Greek Renaissance. It was believed that this Oriental Renaissance would liberate European thought and literature from the increasing focus on discipline and rationality that had followed from the earlier Enlightenment. This in part accounts for the enthusiasm for India in the writings of German authors, such as Herder, or the brothers Wilhelm and Auguste Schlegel, or Novalis. Others, such as the English poets Wordsworth and Coleridge, were apprehensive of the changes introduced by industrialization and turned to nature and to fantasies of the Orient.

However, this enthusiasm gradually changed, to conform with the emphasis later in the nineteenth century on the innate superiority of European civilization. Oriental civilizations were now seen as having once been great but currently in decline. The various phases of Orientalism tended to mould European understanding of the Indian past into a particular pattern. In the late nineteenth century it also influenced the emerging Indian middle class in its understanding of its own past. There was an attempt to formulate Indian culture as uniform, such formulations being derived from texts that were given priority. The so-called 'discovery' of India was largely through selected literature in Sanskrit. This interpretation tended to emphasize non-historical aspects of Indian culture, for example the idea of an unchanging continuity of society and religion over 3,000 years; and it was believed that the Indian pattern of life was so concerned with metaphysics and the subtleties of religious belief that little attention was given to the more tangible aspects.

German Romanticism endorsed this image of India, and it became the mystic land for many Europeans, where even the most ordinary actions were imbued with a complex symbolism. This was the genesis of the idea of the spiritual east, and also, incidentally, the refuge of European intellectuals seeking to distance themselves from the changing patterns of their own societies. A dichotomy in values was maintained, Indian values being described as 'spiritual' and European values as 'materialistic', with little attempt to juxtapose these values with the reality of Indian society. This theme has been even more firmly endorsed by a section of Indian opinion during the last hundred years. It was a consolation to the Indian intelligentsia for its perceived inability to counter the

technical superiority of the west, a superiority viewed as having enabled Europe to colonize Asia and other parts of the world. At the height of anti-colonial nationalism it acted as a salve for having been made a colony of Britain.

Colonial Constructions: A Utilitarian Critique

The other strand in the European interpretation of the Indian past was a critique of Indian culture. It drew from the Utilitarian, legalistic philosophy current in Britain, and was largely the contribution of those writing on India but based in Britain. This interpretation is best represented in the views of James Mill and Thomas Macaulay and was partially endorsed, but for quite other reasons, by the Evangelicals among the Christian missionaries. Mill, writing his *History of British India* in the early nineteenth century, was the first to periodize Indian history. His division of the Indian past into the Hindu civilization, Muslim civilization and the British period has been so deeply embedded in the consciousness of those studying India that it prevails to this day. It is at the root of the ideologies of current religious nationalisms and therefore still plays a role in the politics of south Asia. It has resulted in a distorting of Indian history and has frequently thwarted the search for causes of historical change other than those linked to a superficial assessment of religion.

Indian civilization was said to lack the qualities that Europe admired. For instance, the perceived emphasis on the values of rational thought and individualism was said to be absent, and India's culture was seen as stagnant. This attitude was perhaps best typified in Macaulay's contempt for things Indian, especially traditional Indian education and learning. The political institutions of India, visualized largely as the rule of Maharajas and Sultans, were dismissed as despotic and totally unrepresentative of public opinion. And this, in an age of democratic revolutions, was about the worst sin. Mill's *History of British India*, in which he argued these propositions, became a hegemonic text in the nineteenth century which influenced many commentators and administrators associated with India. Mill's views were echoed in aspects of colonial policy, increasingly concerned with the conquest of the subcontinent and the restructuring of its economy to suit colonial requirements.

The Utilitarian critique of India argued that backwardness can be remedied through appropriate legislation, which could be used by the British to change the stagnant nature of Indian society that had prevented its progress. Mill's insistence on these negative features reflected his use of this description as part of his campaign to legislate change in Britain. Many of the debates assessing the condition of India can be better explained through a familiarity with the current debates on political economy in Britain at that time.

A theory often associated with the Utilitarian view of Asian civilizations was that of Oriental Despotism. This visualized a system of government consisting of a despotic ruler with absolute power, said to be characteristic of Asian societies. Such societies featured the existence of isolated, self-sufficient village communities whose surplus produce was creamed off by the despotic ruler and his court, governing through an autocratic bureaucracy. The latter controlled irrigation, which was a prerequisite for agriculture dependent on water management, and also organized the collection of surplus produce. Much of Asia was thought to be arid and dry, irrigation being provided by the state and controlled by the bureaucracy to ensure a surplus agricultural income providing revenue for the despot. The peasant was kept subjugated and had little freedom; cities were largely administrative centres and there was hardly any commercial exchange; the association of divinity with kingship

strengthened the status of the king. According to this theory, Oriental Despotism encapsulated the political economy of Asian empires.

This view can be traced to early Greek sources perceiving the Persian Achaemenid Empire of the mid-first millennium BC as despotic. The Greeks themselves were not averse on occasion to despotic behaviour, but their view of Asian societies as culturally alien led to exaggerated accounts. To this was added the vision of luxurious Oriental courts, a vision deriving in part from the luxury trade with the east since early times, and partly on the fantasy world of the east as described by Greek visitors. The Greek physician Ktesias at the Persian court, for instance, let his imagination run riot in describing the marvels, mysteries and wealth of the eastern lands. The Crusades and the ensuing literature on the Turks would have strengthened these notions, many of which were exaggerated to impress European audiences.

Given the concerns of eighteenth-century France and England, the central question was seen as private ownership of land. The theory of Oriental Despotism assumed there was no private ownership of land in Asia and that the king owned all the land. There had been a controversy between Voltaire, supported by the Physiocrats, arguing against the state ownership of land in Asia and Montesquieu, who held the contrary opinion. The standard text on the traditional economy of India used in Haileybury College, where administrators were trained before going to India, was that of Richard Jones who endorsed the theory. The standard history was that of James Mill who also did not question this idea. Those who came to administer India assumed the essential viability of the theory, and some among them were also the pre-eminent historians of the period writing on India.

The theory became axiomatic to the interpretation of the Indian past in the nineteenth century, particularly that aspect which concerned land relations and the rights of the state over the cultivator. The nature of ownership of land was debated, as was the question of who was the owner – the king/state, the individual cultivator or the village community. The village community was sometimes projected as an autonomous republic or as a collective for gathering and paying taxes. These debates were reflected in the writings of administrators and historians, such as Henry Maine, Baden-Powell, Munroe and Montstuart Elphinstone. In the process of answering these questions, conditions in pre-colonial India began to assume importance. Land ownership and revenue collection by the state became themes of historical study, but the exploration of these questions was influenced by the prevailing preconceptions about the Indian past.

India as ‘The Other’

Trends such as these, deriving from Orientalist and Utilitarian notions about Asia, led, in the latter part of the nineteenth century to treating Asia as significantly different – ‘the Other’ of Europe. The central question related to the lack of a capitalist system in Asia, and the answers were thought to lie in the pre-modern history of Indian society and religion. The analyses of Karl Marx, in what he called the Asiatic Mode of Production, envisaged despotism and stagnancy as key characteristics which nullified movements towards change parallel to that of Europe. In the absence of private property there were no intermediary groups between king and peasant, nor classes or class conflict of a kind that would lead to dialectical change. This was further nullified by the absence of commercial centres and cities specializing in production for a market which, if they had existed, might have encouraged economic change. The theory of the Asiatic Mode of Production has been resorted to from time to

time in the last century for reasons of current politics to explain the inability of Asian societies to develop capitalist systems. Accepting the idea of Oriental Despotism, Karl Wittfogel argued that the control of the irrigation system – the hydraulic machinery – lay in the hands of the bureaucracy in Asian states, and this allowed the ruler to be despotic. The theory was widely discussed by Asian Marxist historians, who pointed out that there was little historical evidence to support it. The question of technologies, such as irrigation and their impact on Indian history, is in any case far more complex than the simplistic notion of bureaucracies controlling water management and thereby the entire economy.

Another area that brought forth debates among those involved with Indian administration in the nineteenth century concerned the origins of caste. The possible genesis was said to be from regulations of kinship and marriage or occupation, religious functions or political hierarchies. Caste was linked to religion and the close connection between the two was seen as a barrier to economic change. This was discussed in Max Weber's study of the religion of India, focusing on Hinduism. Castes were projected as distinct and separate, with no social action across castes being possible. Max Weber was also concerned with the non-emergence of capitalism in India, but his perspective was different from that of Karl Marx. He surveyed a variety of religious sects, and the underlining feature that he emphasized was the absence of a Puritan ethic in their belief and function. This for him was a crucial factor in the emergence of capitalism in Europe. The Puritan ethic favoured frugality, saving and investment of wealth, a commitment to a vocation and a concern with the salvation of the soul. Economic rationality had to be present in the religious teaching of the ethic. The economic rationality of a number of Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina sects was thought to have played a marginal role. Even those Islamic sects in India that were significant to its commerce, and whose religious perceptions were heavily infused with the local religious interests of commercial castes, were excluded, since India was seen as a Hindu civilization. Curiously, the contribution of colonialism to the emergence of capitalism in Europe was given no attention in this analysis. The intention was to depict a situation in contrast to the European, even if the depiction had to be exaggerated.

Weber's study of Indian society in terms of its caste components and its interface with religious activity was not an isolated interest. This was an area in which a number of philologists, sociologists and specialists of religious studies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had developed an interest, often seeing the Indian evidence as indicative of a different system from those now familiar to European scholars. Emile Durkheim's studies helped to recognize survivals from earlier societies in the rituals of later historical periods. His demarcation between beliefs and rituals was significant to later studies of Vedic sacrifice, and the centrality of deity to religion and its absence in Buddhism was also a matter of considerable debate in defining religion. Marcel Mauss and H. Hubert analysed the ritual of sacrifice in some detail, particularly in attempts to separate the sacred from the profane. Mauss's work on gift-giving was pathbreaking in examining the links between social and religious relationships, and early Indian texts were central to these studies. Celestin Bougie raised the question of whether caste was characteristic of Hindu society alone, or whether it could be found in other societies. This led him to define caste as more pertinent to *jatis* – hereditary groups arranged hierarchically, with unequal rights, a separation based on taboos of marriage rules, food and custom, and a resistance to unification with others. This was a different analysis from that of many Indologists, for whom the definition of caste was restricted to *varna* or ritual status and viewed in terms of brahmanical culture. *Jati* and *varna* did not annul each other, but had different origins and functions.

‘Discovering’ the Indian Past

When European scholars in the late eighteenth century first became curious about the past of India their sources of information were largely brahmans, who maintained that the ancient tradition was preserved in Sanskrit works about which they alone were knowledgeable. Thus, much of the early history of India was reconstructed almost entirely from Sanskrit texts, and reflected views associated with their authors. Many of these works were texts on religion or manuals of ritual, which coloured the interpretation of early Indian culture. Even texts with other concerns often had brahman authors and commentators, and were therefore biased in favour of those in authority, generally adhering to brahmanical theories of society irrespective of whether or not they had widespread historical applicability. For example, caste as described in texts such as the *Dharma-shastras* referred to *varna* distinctions, a hierarchy of ritual status creating a closed stratification of society, apparently imposed from an early period and thereafter preserved almost intact for many centuries. The lower castes were seen from the perspective of the upper-caste brahman authors of the texts. Yet the actual working of caste in Indian society permitted of variation, in accordance with local conditions, which the authors of the *Dharma-shastras* were reluctant to admit.

It is curious that there were only a few attempts to integrate the texts studied by Indologists with the data collected by ethnographers. Both constituted substantial but diverse information on Indian society. Presumably the bifurcation was influenced by the distinction between ‘civilized’ and ‘primitive’ peoples, the latter being said to have no literature. Those who studied oral traditions were regarded as scholars but of another category. Such traditions were seen as limited to bards, to lower castes and the tribal and forest peoples, and as such not reliable when compared to the texts of the higher castes and the elite. Had the two been seen as aspects of the same society, the functioning of caste would have been viewed as rather different from the theories of the *Dharma-shastras*.

The use of evidence from a variety of different sources that were later to become dominant was a challenge to certain aspects of textual evidence, but a corroboration of others, thus providing a more accurate and less one-sided picture of the past. Evidence from contemporary inscriptions, for example, became increasingly important. A small interest developed in genealogies and local chronicles. James Tod gathered information from bards and local chronicles for a history of various Rajput clans, but this did not lead to greater interest in collecting bardic evidence or assessing the role of bards as authors of local history. Tod tended to filter the data through his own preconceptions of medieval European society, and was among those who drew parallels with European feudalism, albeit of a superficial kind. He popularized the notion that the Rajputs were the traditional aristocracy and resisted Muslim rule, disregarding their political alliances and marriage relations with Muslim rulers. L. P. Tessitori made collections of genealogies and attempted to analyse them, but these never found their way into conventional histories. He too consulted local bards in Rajasthan and collected their records.

Those interested in studying the Indian past and present through its languages and literatures, its ethnology and religion, gradually increased. The nineteenth century saw considerable advances in what came to be called Indology – the study of India by non-Indians, using methods of investigation developed by European scholars in the nineteenth century. In India the use of modern techniques to ‘rediscover’ the past came into practice. Among these was the decipherment of the *brahmi* script, largely by James Prinsep. Many inscriptions pertaining to the early past were written in *brahmi*, but knowledge of how to read the script had been lost. Since inscriptions form the annals of Indian

history, this decipherment was a major advance that led to the gradual unfolding of the past from sources other than religious and literary texts. Epigraphic sources introduced many new perspectives that have as yet not been exhausted. They were used for firming up historical chronology but their substantial evidence on social and economic history, as also on the history of religious sects, was recognized only subsequently. Numismatics took off from reading bilingual coin-legends, some in Greek and *brahmi* on the Indo-Greek coins minted at the turn of the Christian era. The name of the king written in Greek had an equivalent written in *brahmi*, which provided some clues to the decipherment of *brahmi*. Alexander Cunningham explored the countryside searching for archaeological remains, using the seventh-century itinerary of the Chinese Buddhist monk, Hsüan Tsang, as a guide, and summarized his explorations in *The Ancient Geography of India*. Professionally, many of these scholars were surveyors and engineers, charting the colony in more senses than one. Textual analyses, which had begun with Sanskrit texts, were now slowly including Pali texts associated with Buddhism and, later, Prakrit texts of the Jaina tradition. This was careful, meticulous work and enlarged the data on the Indian past. The interpretation of what was found was of course most often within the framework of a colonial perspective on the Indian past.

Many who had visited India from afar in the early past recorded their impressions for various purposes, and these are available as Greek, Latin, Chinese and Arabic writings, which provide different perspectives from the Indian. The descriptions of the visitors can sometimes be correlated with the more tangible remains of the past made possible through excavations. The corpus of evidence on Buddhism, for instance, was increased with the availability of the chronicles from Sri Lanka. Buddhist Canonical texts translated into Chinese and various central Asian languages filled in lacunae, in some cases providing significant variant readings. Similarly, texts in Arabic and Persian relating to the history of India began to be studied in their own right, and ceased being regarded only as supplements to Islamic culture in western Asia. Strangely, Indians travelling outside the subcontinent do not seem to have left itineraries of where they went or descriptions of what they saw. Distant places enter the narratives of storytelling only very occasionally.

Notions of Race and their Influence on Indology

Linguistic studies, especially those of Sanskrit grammarians, helped develop the discipline of comparative philology in Europe, which in turn led not only to encouraging the study of the early languages of Asia but also to re-reading the early history of Eurasia. The study of Sanskrit and the ethnography of India also fed into what was emerging as a new perspective on human society, the discipline of 'race science' as it came to be called. Race was a European invention that drew from a variety of contemporary studies and situations, such as the categorizing of plants by Linnaeus, Social Darwinism arguing for the survival of the fittest, and the triumph of imperialism that was used to claim superiority for the European.

Social concerns, which later incorporated racial attitudes, governed the British approach towards their empire. Traditional aristocracies were regarded as racially superior and their status upheld prior to their being incorporated into the new colonial hierarchy. This also enhanced the status of the colonizer. Traditions could be invented, drawing on a supposed history and legitimizing authority. But theories of race were also applied to larger categories of people, believed to be the authors of civilizations.

F. Max Müller is one example of a scholar who reflected on race while studying Sanskrit. His major contribution to the interpretation of Indian history was the reconstruction of a perceived Aryan presence, or even on occasion a race, from his study of the *Vedas*. Like Mill, Max Müller did not think it necessary to visit India, yet he projected Indian society as a reversal of the European, evidenced by his books *India, What Can it Teach Us?* and *Biographies of Words and the Home of the Aryas*. His fanciful descriptions of Indians made of them a gentle, passive people who spent their time meditating. His study of Vedic Sanskrit and philology brought him to his theories about the Aryans. In showing the similarities between Sanskrit, Greek and Latin, William Jones had argued for a monogenesis of language, suggesting that they had all descended from an ancestral language. Indo-European was now projected as such a language, a hypothetical language reconstructed from known languages that were related to each other within a structure of linguistic rules. This was often incorrectly extended to equating all those who spoke Indo-European languages with membership of an Aryan race. In the latter half of the nineteenth century discussions on social inequality were often projected in racial terms as in the writings of Gobineau.

Max Müller maintained that the Aryans had originated in central Asia, one branch migrating to Europe and another settling in Iran, with a segment of the Iranian branch subsequently moving to India. He dated the earliest composition of the latter, the *Rig-Veda*, to about 1200 BC. The Aryans, he maintained, had invaded in large numbers and subordinated the indigenous population of northern India in the second millennium BC. They had introduced the Indo-Aryan language, the language of the conquerors who represented a superior civilization. The latter emerged as Vedic culture and became the foundation of Indian culture. Since a mechanism for maintaining racial segregation was required, this took the form of dividing society into socially self-contained and separate castes. The racial imprint may also have been due to the counterposing of *arya* with *dasa*, since it was argued that in the earliest section of the Vedic corpus, the *Rig-Veda*, the *dasa* is described as physically dissimilar to the *arya*, particularly with reference to skin colour. This was interpreted as the representation of two racial types. Race was seen as a scientific explanation for caste and the four main castes or *varnas* were said to represent the major racial groups. Their racial identity was preserved by the strict prevention of intermarriage between them.

The equation of language and race was seen to be a fallacy even by Max Müller, but there was a tendency to use it as a convenient distinction. In his later writings he clarified this fallacy, but by then it had become common currency. That Aryan should have been interpreted in racial terms is curious, since the texts use it to refer to persons of status who speak Sanskrit and observe caste regulations. The equation had still wider ramifications. It appealed to some of those working on Dravidian languages, who proposed that there was a Dravidian race speaking Dravidian, prior to, and distinct from, the Aryan. They quoted in support the fact that Indo-Aryan is an inflected language, and therefore quite distinct from the Dravidian languages which are agglutinative. Gradually, Proto-Dravidian was projected as the original language and came to be equated with Tamil, which is not a historically or linguistically valid equation. Proto-Dravidian, like Indo-European, is a hypothetical language reconstructed from known Dravidian languages of which Tamil was one, and therefore Tamil would have evolved later. The theory of a Dravidian civilization prior to the coming of the Aryans was to be reinforced in the 1920s by the discovery of the cities of the Indus civilization, Mohenjo-daro and Harappa, dating to the third millennium BC.

The reaction in India to the theory of Aryan race was wide-ranging, even among those who were not historians. It came to be used – and continues to be used – in the political confrontations of various groups. This is demonstrated by two examples at the extreme ends of the spectrum. Jyotiba

Phule, an authority for the Dalits, argued in the late nineteenth century that the Sanskrit-speaking brahmins were descended from the Aryans who were alien to India, and that the indigenous peoples of the lower castes were therefore the rightful inheritors of the land. This argument assumes a conflict between the dominant upper caste and the conquered, oppressed lower castes. This was the foundation of caste confrontation and an explanation for caste hierarchy. It was later to be used extensively in those political movements that sought to justify their non-Brahmin and anti-Brahmin thrust, especially in south India.

At the opposite end, some are now propagating an interpretation of Indian history based on Hindu nationalism and what has come to be called the Hindutva ideology. Since the early twentieth century, this view has gradually shifted from supporting the theory of an invasion to denying such an event, now arguing that the Aryans and their language, Sanskrit, were indigenous to India. The amended theory became axiomatic to their belief that those for whom the subcontinent was not the land of their ancestors and the land where their religion originated were aliens. This changed the focus in the definition of who were indigenous and who were alien. The focus moved from caste to religion: the aliens were not the upper castes, but Muslims and Christians whose religion had originated in west Asia. The Communists were also added to this group for good measure! According to this theory only the Hindus, as the lineal descendants of the Aryans, could be defined as indigenous and therefore the inheritors of the land, and not even those whose ancestry was of the subcontinent, but who had been converted to Islam and Christianity.

Mainstream historians of an earlier period differed from both these interpretations, particularly the second. They accepted the theory of an invasion, with the introduction of Indo-Aryan and its speakers as the foundation of Indian history. This appealed to members of the upper castes who identified themselves as the descendants of a superior race – the Aryans – some insisting that membership of this race implied a kinship connection with the British! The theory provided what was thought to be an unbroken, linear history for caste Hindus. However, the discovery of the Indus civilization and its city culture in the 1920s contradicted this theory of linear descent. The cities of the Indus civilization are of an earlier date than the composition of the Vedic corpus – the literature of the Indo-Aryan speaking people – and do not reflect an identity with this later culture. The insistence on a linear history for the Hindus is now the reason for some attempts to take the Vedic culture back in time and identify it with the Indus civilization. Today mainstream historians argue that despite little archaeological evidence of a large-scale Aryan invasion with a displacement of the existing cultures, there is linguistic evidence of the Indo-Aryan language belonging to the Indo-European family, having been brought to northern India from beyond the Indo-Iranian borderlands and evolving through a series of probably small-scale migrations and settlements.

A close affinity can be observed between the present-day Hindutva view of ‘the Aryans’ and nineteenth-century colonial views, in particular the theories of some Theosophists. Colonel Olcott, for example, was among the early Theosophists who maintained that the Aryans were indigenous to India, as was the language Indo-Aryan; that Aryan culture as the cradle of civilization spread from India to Europe; and that the Aryan literature – the Vedic corpus – was the foundation of knowledge. Such Theosophical views attracted some of the nineteenth-century Indian socio-religious reform movements, such as the Arya Samaj. The Theosophical movement in India had a number of British and European members, some of whom may have endorsed these ideas as a form of sympathy for Indian nationalism. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were times when there were links between various wide ranging or alternatively narrowly focused assortments of ideas, some of which involved theories of race, of the Aryans, of Theosophy and of nationalisms.

By the mid-twentieth century, the notion that language and race can be equated was found to be invalid, and indeed the entire construction of unitary races was seriously doubted. The concept of an Aryan race fell apart. Race is essentially a social construct, although initially it was claimed to be based on biology. Recent genetic studies have further invalidated this claim. It is therefore more correct to refer to 'the Indo-Aryan speaking peoples' than to 'the Aryans', although the latter term can be used as a shorthand. It is important to emphasize that it refers to a language group and not to race, and language groups can incorporate a variety of people.

History and Nationalism

As we have seen, those who were most directly concerned with India in the nineteenth century were the British administrators, many of whom wrote on the history of India. Such histories tended to be 'administrators' histories', recounting the rise and fall of dynasties and empires. This was also the predominant subject of historical study in Europe at that time. Admiration for the Roman Empire was imprinted both on those involved with the British Empire and on historians, such as Vincent Smith, writing on Indian history at the turn of the century; the first empire provided the model for the second. The protagonists of history were kings and the narration of events revolved around them. The autocratic king, oppressive and unconcerned with the welfare of his subjects, was the standard image of the Indian ruler, with a few exceptions such as Ashoka, Chandra Gupta II and Akbar. As for actual governing, the underlying assumption was that British administration was superior and a centralized bureaucracy was the best form of administration.

In the late nineteenth century Indian historians followed the model of political and administrative history, producing dynastic histories highlighting the lives of rulers. But colonial explanations of the Indian past were not always acceptable to Indian historians. Historical theories were part of the growing political contestation, particularly now that the close relationship between power and knowledge was being tacitly recognized. The evolution of an Indian middle class familiar with the English language indicated more communication between the colonizer and the colonized.

Most Indian historians of the early twentieth century were either participants in the national movement for independence or influenced by it. Prominent among them, and expressing varying degrees of nationalist sentiment, were R. Mitra, R. G. Bhandarkar, R. C. Dutt, A. S. Altekar, U. N. Ghoshal, K. P. Jayaswal, H. C. Raychaudhuri, R. K. Mookherjee, R. C. Majumdar, K. A. Nilakanta Sastri and H. C. Ojha. Historical interpretation often drew from existing views but could be changed to what was now regarded as a legitimate nationalist interpretation. Nationalist historians tended to endorse the more favourable views from colonial readings of the early past, but criticized the unfavourable. Thus, it was asserted that some institutions such as democracy and constitutional monarchy were familiar to the Indian past. References to the *mantriparishad*, the council of ministers, were compared to the working of the British Privy Council. Non-violence was praised as a special Indian contribution to civilization, yet at the same time the Gupta King, Samudragupta, was described as the Napoleon of India and his conquests much lauded. Nationalism was taken back to the fourth century BC with the opposition to Alexander's campaign and the creation of the Mauryan Empire that extended over virtually the entire subcontinent. Aryan Vedic culture was viewed as the foundation of Indian civilization, its antiquity taken back to the second millennium BC. The emphases on indigenous origins of many past achievements were gradually becoming visible. There was an

objection – not surprisingly – to the theory of Oriental Despotism, but an endorsement for the ancient past being a ‘Golden Age’; such an age being a prerequisite for claims to civilization. This view was an inevitable adjunct to nationalist aspirations in the early twentieth century. The Golden Age was either the entire Hindu period that was seen as unchanging and universally prosperous, or else the reign of the Gupta kings which historians, both Indian and British, had associated with positive characteristics and revival of the brahmanical religion and culture.

Cultural achievement was measured in terms of the arts, literature and philosophy, with less attention to descriptions of social realities. It also put a premium on Sanskrit sources compared to those in Pali, Prakrit or other languages. Sanskrit had been the language of the courts and of upper-caste Hinduism. What were regarded as lesser languages were assumed to have been used by people of lesser status. Sanskrit texts were given priority even where there were variants of the same narrative in other languages. Such variants, although known, were seldom analysed in a historically comparative way, a case in point being the different versions of the story of Rama. The Buddhist telling of the story in the Pali *Jatakas*, or the Prakrit versions of Jaina authors, were discussed in the context of the study of the *Jatakas* or of Jaina texts but seldom in a comparative way with similar works in Sanskrit, such as the *Ramayana* of Valmiki.

Linked to this was a *bête noire*, casting its shadow on much of the early writing on ancient India. European historians working on this period had been brought up on the classical tradition of Europe, believing that the greatest human achievement was the civilization of the ancient Greeks – *le miracle Grec*. Consequently, every newly discovered culture was measured against the norms set by ancient Greece and invariably found to be lacking. Or, if there were individual features worth admiring, the instinct was to try and connect them with Greek culture. Vincent Smith, for some decades regarded as the pre-eminent historian of early India, was prone to this tendency. When writing of the murals at the famous Buddhist site at Ajanta and particularly of a painting supposedly depicting the arrival of an embassy from a Sassanian king of Persia, unconnected with Greece both artistically and historically, he states:

The picture, in addition to its interest as a contemporary record of unusual political relations between India and Persia, is one of the highest value as a landmark in the history of art. It not only fixes the date of some of the most important paintings at Ajanta and so establishes a standard by which the date of others can be judged, but also suggests the possibility that the Ajanta school of pictorial art may have been derived from Persia and ultimately from Greece.

Early History of India (Oxford, 1924), p. 442

Indian historians reacted sharply to such statements. Attempts were made to prove either that India had not derived any part of its culture from Greece or else that the culture of India paralleled that of Greece, manifesting all the qualities that were present in the latter. That every civilization emerges out of interactions with others, but nevertheless creates its own miracle, was not yet recognized by either European or Indian historians. The notion of the osmosis of cultures shaping histories was still to come.

While European historians of the early twentieth century attempted to discover patterns of change and evolution, Indian history was seldom approached from this perspective. It was treated as a series of islands in time, each named after a particular dynasty. This is not to suggest that studies on other aspects were ignored, but these tended not to be integrated into the history of a period. Valuable and interesting information was collected on various aspects of Indian society and religious practices, but

this information rarely found its way into standard historical works, or even into the histories of religion, and tended more often to be indexed as studies pertaining to particular tribes, castes and communities. An Indologist with a more open approach to Indian culture, interested in the new influences then entering the study of ancient Indian history, was A. L. Basham. His awareness is evident from his sensitive and historically rigorous handling of Indian cultural history in his classic work, *The Wonder That Was India*. This was also an early attempt at extending the parameters of history.

Emphasis on dynastic history endorsed the division of Indian history into three major periods, Hindu, Muslim and British, with a later change of nomenclature to Ancient, Medieval, and Modern, which is still prevalent as a periodization. Since the time brackets remained the same, the earlier division prevailed despite the change of nomenclature. The Ancient period begins with the Indus civilization, which replaced what was termed 'the Aryan period' in earlier histories, and concludes with the Turkish raids on northern India in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and the establishing of the Delhi Sultanate in the thirteenth century AD. This inaugurates the Medieval period, lasting until the coming of the British in the mid-eighteenth century. The equation of Ancient with Hindu, and Medieval with Muslim, was based on the fact that many dynasties of the first period were Hindu while those of the second were Muslim. The Muslim period was imbued with a distinctive character that distinguished it from the earlier period by emphasizing the separateness of Muslim and Hindu culture at all levels. Justification for this thesis was sought in the writings of the theologians and court chroniclers of Muslim rulers. At the best of times, court interests are distant from those of the populace and all the more so when the chronicler or the historian focused on eulogizing the ruler as an exemplary patron of his religion. Court chronicles the world over have to be decoded and cannot be taken as factual accounts. In any case, the political trends dominant in early twentieth-century India justified the separate religious nationalisms by referring to (among other things) the Hindu and Muslim periodization, endorsed by many Indian and non-Indian historians. Only a few questioned its validity. But such a periodization of Indian history is misleading in its emphasis, apart from being questionable in its assumptions. The religious affiliation of rulers was not the pre-eminent motivating factor of change in Indian history, as these categories would imply: it was one among a number of factors.

Indian historians initially tended to follow the pattern established by European historians and wrote largely on dynastic history. But, with the growing presence of a nationalist ideology, the nationalist interpretation of Indian history gained importance. Seminal to this approach was the Indian liberal tradition of the early nineteenth century – as in the writings of Rammohun Roy – and the questioning of negative features attributed to the Indian past, as in the theory of Oriental Despotism. History, as a major component in the construction of national identity and culture, became a subject of contestation between the anti-colonial nationalists and those supporting colonial views, although some colonial views such as those of the Orientalists found a sympathetic echo in nationalist writing. Nationalism seeks legitimacy from the past and history therefore becomes a sensitive subject. Even if nationalist history did not introduce a new explanation of the Indian past, it was nevertheless a powerful voice in the debate on the past.

The Seeding of Communal History

Indian nationalist history challenged aspects of colonial historiography and thereby helped to release historical writing from the imprint of the more negative colonial theories about the Indian past. But by endorsing other theories that provided positive images of the Indian past some historical interpretations emerged even more deeply embedded in these colonial theories. Instead of being reassessed they became foundational to yet other kinds of histories claiming to be nationalist. 'Nationalist' histories of this latter kind are defined by a single category, for instance, that of religion. Muslim and Hindu nationalisms drew from anti-colonial, nationalist ideology for legitimacy, but converted their interests into a nationalism that confined itself to the articulation of a single concern – interpreting history in terms of monolithic religious identities. These ideologies have their roots in the nationalist phase of historical writing but are generally more effective as sources for political mobilization following the success of anti-colonial nationalism. These tendencies, because their appeal is to emotion and to faith, can threaten the intellectual foundations of historical discourse. This has happened with attempts to write both Muslim and Hindu nationalist histories (not to mention others at regional levels). Their refusal to countenance other approaches to explaining the past results in contentious views of history.

Identity in pre-colonial India was dependent on various features such as caste, occupation, language, sect, region and location. As late as the eighteenth century caste was often given primacy over religion, although caste and the religious sect could overlap. But in the colonial reconstruction of Indian society religion was given primacy, particularly as the imprint of identity. Colonial historians argued that, with the arrival of groups professing Islam, there was a confrontation between Hinduism and Islam which led to the crystallization of two communities, the Hindu and the Muslim. Social and political interaction was therefore perceived in terms of the two communities and this duality governed the interpretation of Indian history. Further, it was believed that the importance of caste segmentation of Hindu society was set aside and Muslim society was thought not to have caste identities. Both these propositions are now being questioned. The history of India of the second millennium AD is no longer seen in terms of the confrontation between two religious communities, and social identities drawn from caste, occupation, language and region are being recognized as equally important to these religious communities.

Nevertheless, the influence of interpretations conditioned by what is called communal history, or history based on religious nationalisms, continues. This is different from anti-colonial nationalist history, despite an occasional overlap. Whereas the nationalist perspective was wide-angled and inclusive, that of communal historical writing is narrowed down to projecting the history of a particular community, identified by a monolithic religion being pre-eminent, and excludes the study of others. Muslim religious nationalism sees Indian history in terms of the role of the Muslim community *vis-à-vis* the Hindu, while Hindu religious nationalism projects the Hindu community as confronting the Muslim, despite the large percentage of the population regarding an identity in these terms as ambiguous in the past. Communal history does not attempt to analyse the nature of communities and their changing history. Each community is seen as a homogeneous whole and defined as a uniform, monolithic, religious community functioning as a unit of history.

Religious nationalism retains the colonial periodization of Indian history and the fundamental interpretation that India consists of the majority Hindu community and the minority Muslim community, with other lesser minority communities. Historical causes are explained as arising almost entirely from matters of religion, which are frequently assumed to be confrontational. For some, if the 'Hindu' period was an unblemished Golden Age, the 'Muslim' period was a Dark Age, and this imagery is reversed by those of the alternative persuasion. The justification for the two-nation theory

that led to the partition of India in 1947 was facilitated by the belief that the Hindu and the Muslim communities have, from the start of their relationship in Indian history, constituted two distinct nations; therefore a Muslim and a Hindu nation-state in our time were historically inevitable.

The 'Hindu' period having been described as a Golden Age, there is a hesitation to accept critical evaluations of events and people during this time. The normative texts are taken at face value and read as descriptions of the perfect harmonious society. It is stoutly maintained, for example, that pre-Islamic India was a tolerant society, and references to religious and social intolerance are dismissed as incorrect readings of the source or are ignored.

Some of the limitations of nationalist history were also reflected in regional history when histories of regions were first written in the early twentieth century. The periodization of Hindu, Muslim and British was assumed to be universally applicable. The chronology of this application was far from uniform, with Muslim rule registering a start in the eighth century AD in some areas and a millennium later in others. Regional history developed partly as a reaction to projecting Indian history from the perspective of the Indo-Gangetic Plain, as was often the case in early writing. It was further encouraged by the attention given to local source material with the establishing of new states in the Indian Union after 1947, each anxious to claim its own history. The definition of a region in accordance with the boundaries of present-day states is self-defeating, since such boundaries are themselves the result of historical actions. It would be more appropriate for regional history to use regions as defined in the geography of India.

Research on regional sources is increasing, some of which has modified the earlier perspective of subcontinental history. It also helps in analysing historical problems at greater depth. For instance, because the pattern of caste configurations varies from region to region, instead of searching for the fourfold castes everywhere it would be more helpful to investigate the variations. Similarly, the variant patterns in the environment, resources and economies of the regions can assist in defining aspects of regional history. A more recent trend, again borrowing from one of the concerns of nationalist history, is the introduction, in some instances, of the history of the currently dominant community as coinciding with the history of the region. This tends to warp the overall history of the region. Ideally, the importance of regional history is not only to provide more information about an area, but also to signify variations and similarities, so that generalizations about historical change at the larger level can be more precise.

Marxist Histories and the Debates they Generated

A paradigm shift in the understanding of historical change in India was introduced by Marxist interpretations that began as historical debates from the 1950s onwards. The historical writings of D. D. Kosambi, in particular, encapsulated this shift. An interest in social and economic history rather than dynastic history alone had been initiated and this was now intensified, calling for a different periodization drawing on social change. There was a questioning of Marx's own model for India, contained in his Asiatic Mode of Production, and this was by and large set aside, although there were some historians and sociologists who thought that even if it was not applicable in its entirety it raised worthwhile questions. Its weakness was common to many nineteenth-century theories about Asia, in that early nineteenth-century sources for Asian history available to European scholars were very limited while the available sources had not been explored in any depth.

Kosambi, in his *Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, moved away from dynastic history to describing what he perceived as the dynamics of economy and society in various phases of Indian history. He underlined the importance of what he called 'living prehistory' and cultural survivals that enable us to reconstruct archaeological and historical cultures with greater empathy. His familiarity with the Maharashtrian countryside gave him an insight into the readings of early texts, which led him to new perspectives of the ancient past. His essays in *Myth and Reality* were an even more innovative exploration of the social basis of ideological concepts, resulting in creative analyses of a range of themes from mother goddesses to microliths, pilgrimage routes and the *Bhagavadgita*. Kosambi's intention was to indicate the stages through which he thought Indian society had moved, and the reasons for the change. There may be a debate today about the stages, a debate that has been influenced by other theories of social change, but it cannot be doubted that a pattern of change existed. There is an increasing range of explanations for this change, with some suggesting additional causal features.

The critique of the Asiatic Mode of Production did not lead to the dismissal of Marxist analyses. Attempts were made to see whether other modes of production, such as the Slave Mode of Production or the Feudal Mode of Production, could be used to explain aspects of pre-modern Indian history. The maximum discussion and the most intensive debate was generated over the question of whether there was a Feudal Mode of Production or even feudalism in the Indian past. This opened up a number of new perspectives on the nature of the state, changing economies at different times and the interrelations between religions and social groups.

Earlier comparisons with feudal Europe had tended to be based on rather impressionistic readings which did not provide an explanation of how such societies could have functioned in India. The first systematic analysis was that of Kosambi, who viewed the period as embodying a form of the Feudal Mode of Production, rather than being just a period of small states. Seminal to his discussion was his modification of the Marxist model – what he called feudalism from above and feudalism from below: that from above was where feudatories were directly subordinate to the ruler without the intervention of other intermediaries; and feudalism from below created a hierarchy of landowning intermediaries between the king and the peasant. The two phases have not generally been accepted, but the broad argument endorsing feudalism has been discussed. It was said that the existing land economy was restructured through the ruler giving substantial grants of land to religious beneficiaries, or to officers for their services. In time, the grant was accompanied by a transfer of fiscal and juridical rights from the ruler to the grantees, which converted the latter into landed intermediaries with extensive rights to exploit the labour of the peasant. Whether the form of exploitation was the equivalent of serfdom remains debatable. Charters that had earlier been read only for information on dynasties, kings and chronologies were now being analysed for social and economic data. Cultural and ideological dimensions of feudal society were also introduced into the discussion.

Both the application and the critique of the feudal mode initially came from Marxists. The concept of Indian feudalism was discussed in a number of spirited controversies, eventually attracting both Marxists and non-Marxists. A lively debate was thus initiated on the decentralization of state power and the use of resources and labour, as well as on the religious expressions that arose at this time. Feudalism, as a historical process, is still debated among historians writing of this period, and draws on various models. The Marxist concept of the Feudal Mode of Production is the more familiar category as a starting point. It focuses on the distinct categories of landowners and peasants with family holdings, the relationship between the two being characterized by coercion or a threat of force by the former, who appropriate surplus from the latter and demand labour taxes of various kinds.

There is however the problem that its genesis does not lie in the transition from slavery to serfdom, as in Marx's sequence for Europe, since although there was slave labour in India, a Slave Mode of Production that some associated with Europe did not prevail and there is no unanimity regarding the prevalence of serfdom in India. The genesis of feudalism has to be sought in other changes.

Some have preferred other models of feudalism, such as that which seeks to follow the more general description of medieval Europe with its society of fiefs and vassals, but with variations. This was not necessarily replicated in India, but approximations could provide fresh readings of a comparative kind. Thus many medieval societies functioned through coercing a subject peasantry, which was in turn controlled through service tenures since land was the basis of relationships and power was decentralized in such societies. The term 'feudal' has been applied to such diverse situations that it is difficult to provide a single definition, applicable to all.

The recognition of variants in modes of production drew from the idea that a dialectical method could be used to arrive at formulations about history, but it need not follow the stipulated five stages or modes as described by Marx, of which primitive communism, slavery and feudalism would pertain to pre-colonial history. Thus some theories derived from Marxism have departed from the framework of the modes defined for Europe and have also been influenced in their methodology by other innovatory forms. Illustrative of this are some studies of the formation of states, particularly in the first millennium BC, and the manner in which ruling clans and chiefs acquired the characteristics of states and kings. The discussions of this process show a familiarity with anthropological analyses of the early state, although the utilization of such models is limited. Among anthropologists at the time there was considerable interest in questions relating to the control over irrigation, labour, resources and technologies, and these questions are reflected in the early notions of the state.

Discussion on various aspects of the evolution of a state has included changes that led to this, just prior to 500 BC in north India. Transitions to state systems, together with urban centres, have been analysed with reference to the kingdoms of the Ganges Plain of the mid-first millennium BC, with an emphasis on locating the agencies of change: the identification of territory; rituals enhancing the notion of conquest and power; the use of iron technology; the production of an agricultural surplus; the beginnings of administrative control; and new ideologies confronting those already established. With the emergence of empire in the Mauryan period, a distinction has been suggested between empire and kingdom, a distinction moving away from the arbitrary use of the label 'empire' and seeking to explain the distinctive structure of an empire. This also has some relevance to the definition of kingdoms.

Other theories explaining the state, particularly of the period subsequent to the eighth century AD, do not subscribe to the Marxist model but their critique of the model has been the starting-point of their own formulations. One view is that the states of the post-Gupta period differed from the previous ones, but that this change did not constitute feudalism. Territories emerged under new names and ruling lineages were associated with territorial names, rather than with clan names. Pre-state polities were transformed into states, and the creating of a centre of power involved the colonization of an area by settling subordinate branch lineages of the main dynasty in new areas. Rather than a decentralized feudal system, this is seen as spreading monarchy into pre-state societies and introducing what has been called an 'integrative polity'. The theory has been discussed mainly with reference to Rajasthan, but how widespread it may have been has yet to be ascertained. And of course every polity is integrative in some way. The process could be pertinent to areas where new states were being formed but may be less applicable to areas with old, established states. The extent to which the new process differs from the old would also have to be investigated.

Yet another model is that of the segmentary state. As originally formulated, it referred to societies in Africa following a segmentary form of social organization and without a clear state system. Segmentary societies are generally associated with systems where lineages determine the identities of descent groups. A segmentary state is therefore something of a contradiction in terms. The Alur in East Africa was said to be an emerging state system still rooted in segmentary forms. This model was applied to kingdoms in India, and particularly to the southern kingdoms. It assumes the separation of political sovereignty from ritual authority, arguing that the former is confined to the central or core area of the state whereas the latter holds for the peripheries. Unity is sought through the control of the centre at the apex, but more broadly through ritual conformity. The theory does not explain the pattern of political economies and has found little support, although in this case, too, the initial arguments in the debate led to some interesting explorations of south Indian history.

The arguments and evidence used in these theories, and more particularly the critiques that they evoked, have moved away from seeing a uniform pattern applicable to every state. This has led to clarifying some aspects of the history of this period. For example, the impressive statistical research by Japanese and south Indian scholars, using computer-based analyses of inscriptions, has refined methods and generalizations pertaining to this history. The emerging picture of agrarian and commercial structures, with their relationship to governmental authority and the administrative networks that it fostered, is central to the discussion. Attention has also been directed to other processes, such as the creation of new castes and new religious beliefs and practices. These historical interests will be discussed in greater detail in the relevant chapters (11 and 13). The intention here is merely to provide a pointer to the directions they have taken.

History as a Social and Human Science

The writing of Marxist histories began at the same time as other developments in Indian historiography, evident from the discussion above. In India, the 1950s and 1960s saw the earlier germination of the social sciences being transmuted into established disciplines. This was in part linked to the post-independence period when realistic assessments of Indian society were being called for. Related subjects such as growth economics, demography, social anthropology and sociology, socio-linguistics, archaeology and history developed independently, with the growing interest in their subject matter, across disciplines in interdisciplinary research. Questions asked in one discipline began to interest the practitioners of another.

History was pivotal, since there was always a curiosity in comparing the past with the present. Historians began to ask a different set of questions from those that had been asked previously and expanded the range of the theories of explanation. History relating to society, economy, culture and religion was explored, and the interconnections between them attracted interest. Historical research continued to require technical expertise in the handling of a range of source materials from artefacts to texts, but in addition also required some understanding of theoretical procedures of analysis. This differed from the approach of those for whom history was just a narrative about the past with a focus on providing information. Historical imagination shifted from the romance of reconstructing the past to a more creative exploration, asking a wide spectrum of questions and searching for answers.

The Marxist intervention, quite apart from introducing new perspectives into historical studies, also encouraged a range of new themes considered legitimate to historical analyses. The influential

writings on history by the French Annales School, which became available in English and began to be widely read a few decades ago, coincided with these explorations. These were historians who helped move history further towards studies of society, economy, population, environment and the ideas and attitudes of people to the world surrounding them. Inevitably, this involved using the methodology of disciplines such as social and economic anthropology, the sociology of religion, economics, ecological studies and intellectual history to ask new questions of existing data or to formulate new ways of analysing evidence. Interconnections were made, linking many facets that had earlier been treated in isolation or ignored.

The interests that characterize the kind of history of those who contributed to these changes grew in part from the notion of the social sciences, or the human sciences as some would prefer to call them, as a legitimate method to explore the human past. This required a wider recognition of what constitutes historical data. It included not only the representation of actions, but also the way in which they were represented through words, objects or the intervening landscape with virtually everything that reflected the presence of the human. The focus was less on reconstructing reality and more on making the past intelligible. This required transcending the single event to view actions as not just individual articulations, but part of a wider context of human and social activity. Hence the emphasis on society, economy, religious articulations, art, literature and systems of knowledge. The necessary multiplicity of causes in such studies added to the dimension of historical explanation. Thus the social dimension of culture introduces questions such as who created the form, what was its function, who was the audience and how was it disseminated. Such a perspective not only enlarges historical space, but also prevents time being restricted to a linear narrative. The coexistence of different concepts of time becomes possible: Fernand Braudel writes of the historical moment of the event, the conjuncture of its broader social and economic context, and the long duration of the landscape and geology within which the event is enacted.

Such studies are also providing a comparative perspective on Indian history, not along the old lines of declaring one culture to be the norm and judging others by its standards, but rather in terms of comparative analyses of forms and their functions across more than one culture. This approach has made historical studies of other parts of the world relevant to the intellectual equipment of the historian of early India. Some notable examples are: those of Moses Finley and Arnaldo Momigliano on the Greco-Roman world; Marc Bloch on medieval Europe; Joseph Needham on the history of scientific thought and practice in China; Nathan Wachtel's study of the Peruvian perception of the Spanish conquest; and Jan Vansina's recent work on the oral tradition. The debates initiated by their work among a wide range of historians from various societies and cultures provide comparative ways of approaching the understanding of Indian history as well, although obviously the particularities of Indian history will remain.

The purpose of indicating the changing outlook of historical writing on India is not to dismiss the work of the early historians as being without value or to denigrate the importance of their scholarship. The inadequacies of their interpretations were often the inadequacies of their times, for historians are frequently far more representative of their age than they are aware. Despite such shortcomings, these studies laid the foundations of the history of India, providing a chronological and historical framework around which fresh interpretations could be constructed and which would place the ideas and institutions of Indian civilization in what was believed to be a significant perspective. Changes in the requirements of a historical approach now place less emphasis on chronological and dynastic reconstruction and more on understanding the layered nature of past societies.

Social history is now taking cognizance of the studies of diverse forms of kinship and of gender

relations in the multiple societies of the Indian past. These have been encouraged by anthropological studies, and also by historians working on gender. Earlier studies on the status of women were largely collections of information on the life of women, with a general approval of their status, as given in the *Dharma-shastras* and other normative texts. This was part of the assumption of a Golden Age. It was also an encouragement to women to participate in the national movement, and the underlying argument was that even in the early past they were respected partners. Only later did their condition worsen. The new work is far more searching, attempting to explain the variations in the status of women in terms of different periods, regions and castes, and relates these to historical change. Social aspects that determined status, such as rights to property, marriage regulations and the use of women as labour, inevitably point to discrepancies in the earlier uniformly positive representation. There is a growing understanding of the implications of patriarchy, not only in determining gender relations, but also as a condition of society and in the manner of its assertion through social norms, religious beliefs or the work carried out by women. Women were not a distinct and separate category but an integral part of the social process. Hence the status of women becomes a commentary on society.

Lower castes, marginalized groups and untouchables now enter historical narratives, sometimes as significant players, as for example in religious movements governed by social concerns. Those who laboured were not thought of as playing a part in historical change, perhaps because those who did not labour wrote the sources that were quoted. It is sometimes possible, however, to infer the life of those who laboured from passing references in the texts. But the recognition of labour as an essential precondition to activities that are admired from the past has encouraged historians to look for such references in order to complete the picture of society.

The historian of India was once regarded primarily as an Orientalist, or an Indologist, in the days when the studies of the languages and cultures of Asia were fragrant with exotica. This concept of Oriental studies has been mutating in the last century, both in India and elsewhere. In the contemporary world, the history of early societies is being approached from many perspectives, rather than being limited to the periods said to have created 'classical cultures'. Political histories and dynastic studies remain an important aspect of historical interpretation, but these are also viewed in the light of other features that make a society and a culture. Changes in the political pattern are inextricably entwined with changes in the economic structure and in social relationships. If a religious movement finds a large following, then its attraction must have some relevance to the kind of people who support it. A new language and a new literature can only emerge if they fulfil a need for the society in which they are rooted. It is not enough for the historian to present the ideas of those who attempted to create the contours of the history of India. It is essential to attempt to know how these ideas arose and the extent of their acceptability within Indian society.

Reconsidering Periodization

A reconsideration of periodization becomes necessary, both because of the discussions on the nature of historical change and because of the introduction of new categories of sources. Archaeological evidence, for instance, defines a society from viewpoints different from the literary. These perspectives of the past have inevitably led to questioning the current forms of the periodization of Indian history. The terms Ancient, Medieval and Modern were taken from European history and

applied to the existing tripartite division of Indian history. European history made a distinction between Antiquity/Ancient referring to the Greco-Roman civilization, and Medieval, which was essentially the period of Christian Europe. Both Ancient and Medieval had specific connotations in European history, which were not relevant to Indian history.

‘Ancient’ in Indian history remains an imprecise term, conveying little of the nature of the period, and ‘Medieval’ merely means the middle. In addition, the Ancient period covers a large enough span to include major changes within it. Accommodating variant patterns of historical change in the subcontinent to a uniform pattern also presents problems. In recent years this tripartite division has been modified to suit Indian history. The first period is described as Early Historical and terminates in about the eighth century AD. Subsequent to this is the Early Medieval – from the eighth century to the thirteenth century. The Medieval begins with Turkish rule or the Sultanates and ends with the decline of the Mughals. The fourth and last period is the Modern, marking the establishment of British rule in the eighteenth century.

Although an improvement on the tripartite division, this tends to remain vague. The start of the Early Historical period is generally associated with the emergence of urban centres and states in the Ganges Plain in about 500 BC, marking a major change from that which preceded it. But this does not accommodate the previous lengthy period of pre-state and pre-urban society, subsequent to the decline of the Indus civilization and different from what emerged in the mid-first millennium BC. Contemporary written documents are available only from the third century BC, still leaving the earlier period without an appropriate label. A break around the eighth century AD is certainly called for, given the socio-economic changes and new developments in religions registered in the subcontinent, but whether the label Early Medieval conveys an impression of these changes is another matter. Periodization, if it is not merely to be a chronological division, should give some indication of social mutations and project a sequence involving what came before and what follows. Advances in historical knowledge could therefore alter the periodization. The ambiguity of the term ‘Medieval’ is now being debated for European history and it might be better to consider a more definitive term.

A possible alternative periodization, although using more descriptive terms, could be as given here. This is far from definitive, has no easy labels for quick reference, but directs attention to substantial points of historical change. The divisions as listed below would not be of equal length. For purposes of grouping them into larger periods the focus would be on a central theme, towards which historical activities may be directed or from which they may lead. The attempt here is to suggest some ideas towards a more realistic view of change and to indicate what the characteristics of this maybe.

The following is a suggested periodization:

1. 1 Hunter-gatherers, pastoralists and early farmers
2. 2 First urbanization: the Indus Plain and north-west India
3. 3 Megalithic settlements of the peninsula

(The focal point of these three periods was the Indus urbanization with cultures that led up to it and others that diverged after its decline. Archaeological data provides the evidence for this period.)

4. 4 Chiefships and kingships 1200-600 BC

5. 5 Second urbanization and state formation in the Ganges Plain c. 600-400 BC

(The focal point here is the formation of states and urbanization in the Ganges Plain. Period 4 discusses the factors that led up to this. Evidence comes from archaeological data and oral traditions recorded later. The difference in the nature of this urbanization from the earlier calls for attention.)

6. 6 The Mauryan state, c. 400-c. 200 BC?

(The earliest attempt at an imperial system. The possibility of interrogating a range of sources increases.)

7. 7 The rise of the mercantile community and cross-cultural contacts, c. 200 BC-AD 300

(This period saw a range of states and a variety of economic and religious networks in which the role of the mercantile community and cross-cultural contacts had greater significance than before, and contributed to transcontinental cultures.)

8. 8 The creation of Sanskritic cultures, c. AD 300-700

(Characteristics of this period were elements of cultural integration through the evolving of a court culture, recognizable in many parts of the subcontinent, that also reflected the potentialities of creating new states.)

9. 9 Distributive political economies and regional cultures, c. AD 700-1300 *(Both the state structures and the cultural contacts became more predictable from region to region because of the widespread influence of Sanskritic cultures correlated to distributive economies in the form of grants of land. In emphasizing the emergence of regional cultures, the intention is not to present a picture of political fragmentation but to underline the reformulation of politics, society and culture in a pattern that differs from the earlier pre-C Gupta period.)*

10. 10 The assertion of regional identities, c. AD 1300-1550

(An assertion of regional identities becomes more evident in political economies and cultures, but not to the point of preventing the establishment of a powerful suzerain state.)

11. 11 The Mughal state and subsequent regional kingdoms, c. AD 1550-1750

12. 12 British colonial rule and the Indian nationalist response

Defining periods in history is important, but it is equally important to determine the cause of change, a question sometimes referred to as that of the transition from one period to another. Even specific changes may begin casually, but if they occur with sufficient frequency they can give a new direction to the way society functions and this encapsulates historical change. The nature of the transition therefore becomes a significant aspect of periodization. The distinction between the different periods is determined by characteristics of polity, economy, technology, society and religion that were prevalent at the time, as well as some reference to the makers of events wherever available. Inevitably, there is more information on elite groups since they were the authors and patrons. A

corrective to this is sometimes available when archaeology provides evidence of the material culture of ordinary people.

Cultural Histories of a Different Kind

A summary of historical trends such as this should at least mention the questioning of the discipline of history by theories that focus on language, or what has been called 'the literary turn'. Some have argued that as language is the medium of knowledge, that which comes in the form of language constitutes a text; since language is interpreted by the individual, the reading by the individual gives meaning to the text; therefore each time a text is read by a different individual it acquires a fresh meaning. Taken to its logical conclusion, this denies any generally accepted meaning of a text and is implicitly a denial of attempts at historical representation or claims to relative objectivity, since the meaning would change with each reading. However, the prevalent views are more subtle.

Readings can be hegemonic or there can be attempts to ignore alternative readings, but readings with little or no structures of how to read a text can be self-defeating in terms of acquiring knowledge. The more acceptable historical argument would be that there is space for greater sensitivity to alternative texts and readings, and to multiple voices, but that these should observe the procedures of historical analysis. The focus on culture, beliefs and ideologies could be a necessary addition to the earlier historical emphases on politics and the economy, but it is not in itself definitive history since history requires a correlation between the reading of a text and its multi-layered historical contexts. This enables an understanding of what is directly stated in a text and, equally important, that which is implied.

These developments have been paralleled by the continual return to theories of explanation, some of which have been explored and developed, while others have been replaced. For example, Marxism, once thought of by some as synonymous with economic determinism, can no longer be described as such, given the debates that have been generated in recent times through its many varieties – humanist, existentialist, structuralist. Theories arising from colonial readings are being replaced by more analytical studies using a wider range of data and explanation. Nationalist interpretations are also being more rigorously sieved. Paradigms, or frameworks of understanding, are reformulated and in history this change relates most closely to the question of facts and concepts. The reformulation often comes about through the contemplation of the surrounding world and the attempt to comprehend it.

A wider interest in cultural history has led to analytical studies of texts, not just to arrive at alternative or variant readings but also to view the text as an artefact of history. This requires comparative studies of variant versions as well as placing it in its context. Priority is given to the intention of the author and of the patron if there is one. The close connection between patronage and culture, both literary and artistic, is an essential component of cultural history. This has often raised questions such as who constitutes the audience of the text and what is its intention? This in turn has made historians sensitive to particular audiences determining artistic or literary form or providing variants.

Ascertaining the audience and the intention has been useful in attempts to locate texts that incorporate historical perceptions of the past, in what is now sometimes called the *itihasa-purana* tradition. *Itihasa* literally means 'thus it was' and *purana* refers to that which belongs to the past.

This takes a variety of forms. In the early *Puranas* there are genealogies, some quite fanciful, gradually moving towards more realistic lists of dynastic succession. Subsequently, there are historical biographies of kings and even the occasional minister, largely hagiographic but encapsulating some aspects of historical events. And there are chronicles of regional histories, of which Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* is certainly the finest example. A few chronicles of Buddhist monasteries are also seen as historical narratives. The recording of the rule of a king or the history of a dynasty in the form of inscriptions began just prior to the Christian era, becoming common in the period after the eighth century AD, and these constitute the annals of early Indian history.

Such texts are not histories in any modern sense, but are attempts to capture the past in particular forms and to use it to legitimize the claims of the present. The narratives are set in linear time. Their writing involves the patron ordering the history, the authors formulating it, and an audience whom they seek to address and who acquiesced in the presentation. The forms are not disjointed, and they attempt to borrow from and adapt what has gone before. The *itihasa-purana* tradition presents a narrative of events, their explanation and an attempt at summation. These are not acceptable to modern notions of analyses and arriving at historical generalizations, but they provide insights into how the past was viewed at various points of time many centuries ago.

Linked to the historical tradition, although not classified as such, are the many thousand inscriptions earlier used to reconstruct dynastic history and now being re-read for information on a variety of other facets of history. As texts they sometimes contain alternative statements to those of the normative literature. Those subsequent to the mid-first millennium present a meshing of the culture of the mainstream and the region. If read analytically, such evidence can provide clues to voices other than those of the authors of mainstream texts.

A historical study is not a juxtaposition of islands or fragments of historical facets which are lined up: political, environmental, technological, economic, social, religious and other histories. A historical analysis requires recognizing the fragments, but relating them to a whole that determines what causes events, and formulating an explanation. The complexities of each of these can be fine-tuned by a more accurate attention to the reading of the text, illuminating the reading through perspectives other than the well-known, but these remain the essentials of a historical analysis.

History is concerned with change and historical change, and, although it may not be determined, it is also not arbitrary or purposeless. The formation of varied societies in a region surfaces through historical analysis, and in this surfacing the historian points out the players and the context. Theories of explanation assist in understanding the context and such theories differ. For some, power relations may be fundamental; for others it may be the dialectic of who controls resources and labour and who labours, for still others it may be the relationship between socio-economic structures and the ideologies that they spawn, or the inversion of this. For a few historians it can also be the interlocking of all these.

Theories of interpretation as presented in this chapter are not intended as inevitably sequential, although there are causal links between them. They are the articulation of particular contexts of time, place and events. They have their own histories and constitute many strands in historical thought. Since they are not merely an extension or reversal of data, but are intended to explain complex problems, they have varied existences. Some theories decline or die out. Others persist, generally in a modified form. Some surface aggressively if their function as ideologies of political mobilization is more important than their function as historical explanation. Yet others generate new theories, and these tend to extend the reach of historical analysis.

In this book an attempt is made to anticipate a few of the themes and questions that are significant to understanding the Indian past, and to indicate the people, events and institutions that have contributed to the making of Indian society through time. But the tendency to evaluate Indian history and culture in absolute terms, and to make categorical judgements, has been avoided since such an evaluation within the space of this brief history would merely result in platitudes. In the course of tracing the evolution of certain aspects of Indian life – the environment and the economic structure, changing social relationships, the historical context of religious movements, the emergence and growth of languages, to mention but a few – identifiable patterns have emerged. These patterns have been described and interpreted along lines that appear to me to be the most convincing, given the evidence available and the logic implicit in its analysis. In a survey of this kind the aim is to present the features of the Indian past, hopefully in an intelligible manner, given the complexities of these features. As a historian, I am aware that I too am part of the historical process, and that the paradigm will shift in the future. The direction of the shift may draw on the way history is viewed in present times.